

VOLUNTEER OPERATIONS ANALYSIS REPORT

Process

There were two focus groups conducted at Alexandria Parks and Recreation concerning volunteer operations on April 24, 2002. The first focus group facilitated was with the Alexandria Parks and Recreation staff that worked with volunteers. There was approximately 14 staff present. The second focus group facilitated was with a group of volunteers that were invited to discuss volunteer operations. There were approximately 16 volunteers from all areas of the department, such as youth sports coaches, advisory councils, Adopt a Park, teen leaders, neighborhood groups and dog park volunteers. The session lasted about an hour and a half and the discussion was structured around questions that were similar to the staff volunteer questions. This was done in order to hear both the staff and volunteer perspective. Some responses to operations were very similar and others differed greatly.

Methodology

The park and recreation staff were asked a series of volunteer operations questions. Each of the responses was documented. The focus groups were open for all comments, and the dialogue was insightful. The evening meeting with the volunteers was conducted in the same manner. The volunteers were asked set of questions similar to those asked of the staff. Their responses were documented and incorporated with the staff comments. All the information was summarized for the key findings. The draft notes were sent to the staff for their review and comments. Based on their comments, the final report was completed.

Summary

The Alexandria Parks and Recreation Department has a good volunteer corps. Many of the volunteers are community-minded individuals who want the best parks and services to enhance the quality of life in their community. The department has done a good job of matching the interests of the individuals with the program areas.

The department has many more areas in which volunteers could be utilized, and there is a great need to expand volunteer services is warranted. Volunteers help reduce staff time and resources necessary for projects and programs. Many of the staff feel overwhelmed with the amount of core responsibilities in their position plus the management of volunteers. The department needs to expand personnel to include a volunteer coordinator position or adopt a volunteer-based coordinator position. The position would develop the operation policies and procedures manual, job descriptions, recruitment, application process, training, and recognition program.

The department does recognize volunteers in many of the areas where volunteers are used. The department needs to have a system-wide volunteer recognition program that allows all volunteers from each program area the opportunity to understand the diversity of volunteer accomplishments throughout the parks and recreation department.

The department should strive to standardize forms and procedures to streamline operations and reduce staff workload in regards to volunteer recruitment procedures and management.

Key Findings

The key findings are as follows:

- The amount of volunteers is impressive. There are many people involved in a variety of areas.
- Many areas in which more volunteers could be used were identified.
- The organization of volunteer operations is not coordinated or managed by a specific division or section. Each area creates and manages volunteers separately.
- Communication with volunteers is an issue. Volunteers would like to receive more directed information and opportunities. They consider the information in the brochure to be afterthought or space filler.
- Tracking of volunteer hours is not a coordinated effort, and each section has its own method for collecting the information. In some cases, it is not collected.
- Volunteers are not categorized to distinguish between various types and levels of volunteering.
- Training is not offered to volunteers in all cases.
- No standard orientation process exists for new volunteers. Orientation is only conducted when time allows and is not considered necessary in all cases.
- The staff feel overwhelmed in many cases with the amount of tasks they are responsible for; the inclusion of volunteers is sometimes seen as more of a burden than as assisting them. The training and supervision of volunteers seem to take more time than getting the actual task completed.
- There is no department-wide formal recognition of volunteers. Many sections hold their own recognition event. In most cases, the volunteers in most cases would like to see the city do a city-wide or department-wide recognition program.
- The staff and volunteers would like to see a more organized approach to managing volunteers, administratively and in the field. They feel that volunteer management is more than a one-person job and that multiple coordinators are necessary.
- There are no standards for the application process.
- The liability waivers are an issue in that there is conflicting information about the types necessary for each area.
- The department is lacking volunteer policies and staff training for managing the volunteers. This includes lack of transportation and age limits.
- Most areas do not have volunteer job descriptions so that both staff and volunteers understand the skills needed and the expectations and purpose of each job.
- There is no comprehensive listing of long and short-term volunteer opportunities.

STAFF FOCUS GROUP MEETING REPORT

1) What are the current jobs and tasks for volunteers?

- Assisting the staff with programs, games, working with therapeutics, cooking classes, exposure to inclusion programs, older teens work as volunteers with and without disabilities, some skill building, program set up, and lead activities.
- Programmatic – assisting leaders, may move to developing and leading programs
- Front desk, meeting, greeting, answering phones.
- Advisory Council – made up of parents, leading special events, offering events, raising money, monthly meeting; they maintain their own bank account
- Teens assist in leading activities, using summer youth employment (paid, not really volunteers), others volunteer at the center during the school year (such as cheerleading coaches).
- Community service workers do custodial jobs, maintenance needs around centers, assisting leaders.
- School partnerships assist in tutoring and leading activities.
- Coaches for all sports, parents and teens.
- Community organizations help to co-sponsor and provide manpower for events and programs, and assist financially.
- Feel that the term “volunteer” is a misnomer, is it really volunteering if they are required to do this (courts and schools requiring community service) versus those that volunteer because they want to help.
- My philosophy is that I’ll take any help we can get.
- Trail maintenance – We use scout troops to enhance parts of the park, gardening
- Several adults have been volunteering for 20 years with park projects, gardening, identifying problems redesign ideas for trails - older groups of people, not so much youth.
- Adopt A Park program is a grant to civic associations that supply volunteer manpower, report evaluations of parks, interact with beautification committee; rigid program where the grant is dependent upon the inspection of the parks, money goes towards supplies, supporting operations
- Pick up trash.
- Arts commission is an advisory body to the city, very active in terms of developing organizations and projects, 15 commissioners, executive committee; structure, specific arts related projects, also grants committee that give money to organizations that do not have paid staff, stewards of the funds, train non-profit board members how to work on the Board.
- Special events are very dependent on volunteers; volunteers actually run the festivals, marketing, act as exhibitors, hire entertainment; it’s their event, we empower.
- Tree lighting.
- Cause for Claus – program for Santa Claus, Spanish-speaking Santas
- Administrative volunteers are in-between jobs, or career changers, program interns, given specific projects, leadership oriented; they take it from beginning to end; we have about five per year.

- Master Gardeners are with Friends of the Trees and provide training for master gardeners that identify the trees - we provide park boundaries, has increased our workload for the volunteer effort.

2) How many volunteers are currently active in your system?

- Don't know the number of volunteers.
- We don't go by number of volunteers, we use hours. That varies from month to month. It is reported somewhere in the annual report.

3) What type of tracking do you use for volunteers?

- There is an annual goal of a number of hours by sections.
- Signing in and out.
- School kids – tracked by area.
- Estimates from coordinators.
- Program reports – have number of hours listed.
- Keep files on each individual volunteer coach for mailings.
- It should be accurately documented, however this is a budget issue. It amounts to dollars and cents.
- There is not a uniform method to track.
- Fact is that we are short staffed and to track and complete the paperwork is detracting from our jobs, volunteers are to be assisting us, not making more work.
- There is no volunteer coordinator for the department or within the different divisions.
- Youth workers are not always effective. It takes too much time to watch, train, and supervise them. The end results are not worth it. It takes too much time to deal with them for the results we get.
- We need more guidance to work with volunteers
- The attitudes of some of the volunteers make it difficult to work with them.
- Coordinators are needed to help staff with volunteers, even if part-time volunteer staff.

4) What type of training do you provide to volunteers? Is there an orientation process?

- There is no volunteer training program across the board
- The Arts Commission has an orientation process, train to fill out grant applications
- Grants program has an orientation process prior to review of their grant application
- We do have training for the arts board leadership that includes marketing, fund raising, how to be a board member.
- We do a mini-orientation at the center. We walk them through the basics, nothing that is too time consuming. The volunteers come and go.
- Some organizations that provide volunteers also provide basic training.
- We give them on the job training.
- We have very little turnover in the Adopt A Park program. The coordinators train new people.
- Recreation leaders provide support for volunteers. We give them an idea of what to expect and hope they take the initiative.

- Give them tasks that they are comfortable with; many do not need much training. It takes too much time.
- Coaches are put through a certification process, NYSCA process, set up clinics with local high schools to do training about the sport and the game, take what we can get. Without these volunteer coaches, we wouldn't have a program. We try to get as much training as possible, give feedback wherever possible. The coaches have to be able to teach the rules of the games and basic skills to teach kids. This includes discipline, self-control, working with kids three times a week. Some volunteers transport kids.
- Training can be time consuming.
- Adopt A Park will redirect some of their volunteers. We turn away those that have different goals, no background or expertise. The kids or groups are redirected to the nature area.
- The court-appointed community service workers couldn't go through the criminal check so some areas can't take them.
- Arts commission is a blending of the goals of the organizations and boards.
- Nature and recreation turn them away for reasons from support to attitude.

5) Is there an application process?

- We don't require at arts commission.
- All have their own process.
- We have tried to develop a standardized process.
- We are developing Adopt a Garden program and are reviewing the process. Some aspects go through different channels. There are problems with the clauses within the agreements. Some groups are not comfortable about signing these liability clauses.
- Youth sports do background checks on coaches.
- The license day camps have a criminal background check on all volunteers. There is an area on the form for two references, but those are rarely called to verify.
- Background checks on court appointed prisoners are not necessary.
- Are prisoners really volunteers?
- There are no categories of volunteers.

6) How do you recruit volunteers?

- Media advisory
- Local papers
- Posters
- Flyers
- Registration forms at schools
- Department brochure
- Volunteer bureau
- Retired seniors
- Phone calling
- Each section is doing individually and there is no coordinated effort

7) What does the Department do to recognize volunteer work?

- We hold a picnic for volunteer coaches.
- Certificates are given out.
- Tee shirts and small promotional items are given.
- Park and recreation give awards for projects that are nominated.
- Adopt a Park gives monetary awards up to \$960 that goes to the non-profit that worked on the park or the park itself. The volunteers themselves get recognition from the civic association.
- In the past there was a bi-annual volunteer recognition program. We offer to write reference letters for the volunteers.
- Gave Ben and Jerry's ice cream vouchers.
- Volunteer dinner and certificate to councils

8) Is it important to recognize?

- Absolutely important to recognize the volunteers
- I feel it is difficult. Volunteers don't come to be recognized. I feel they do not like this attention.
- No budget for volunteer recognition or volunteers

9) Who manages the volunteer program?

- No centralized person manages volunteer process, each center or section has his or her own management process.
- Being in therapeutic recreation, staff is always the volunteer coordinator.

10) How do you communicate with the volunteers?

- Letters and emails.
- Phone calls.
- Arts and Therapeutic Recreation have newsletters that are directly mailed to volunteers.
- The park and recreation brochure has volunteer information. This is mailed only to a portion of the community.
- The website lists information, but not sure how effective it is.
- Word of mouth.
- Staff list on their planning sheets that there was written communication for a role in a particular activity.

11) Are there job descriptions for the volunteers?

- Arts department has job descriptions.
- Therapeutic recreation has descriptions
- Adopt a Park
- Nature programs
- Are there age limits to who can volunteer? Is there a park policy?

12) Where are the biggest volunteer gaps or areas where more volunteers could be used?

- Administrative volunteers – clerical, data entry, phones.
- Instructors for programs.
- Across the city there are a multitude of projects that could be accomplished if there were volunteer coordinators working with the volunteers on a long-term basis.
- We need volunteer translators.
- One volunteer coordinator will not be enough; we need a lot of hands-on people to work with volunteers in recruiting, training, supervising, etc.
- The needs vary with the programs.
- Many of our volunteers are one shot (one month average). Some areas have 80% one-shot volunteers; other areas have 1-2% one-shot volunteers.
- Many of the adult volunteers in the Adopt a Park program are long term.

13) What would be the long-term goals for the volunteer component of the department? What is the perfect department?

- Training for the volunteers in the appropriate areas. Some areas do not need training, such as a task that is not skilled based.
- Employee counseling.
- All follow the same process - standardized policies on how handle volunteers
- Department-wide management.
- Have standard waivers and terminology for handling children, transportation, other organizations' permission slips, etc.
- Tacking on duties to others – need to be specific.
- This is a job for more than one person because each section's needs are different.
- All supervisors at one time or another were doing the orientation. We should have an orientation process for new volunteers.
- I'm not sure if a boilerplate liability form would work for all areas.
- City attorney makes it difficult because there are different opinions.
- We need to develop department-wide policies, such as working with children policies, criminal checks, etc.
- Have a department-wide coordination of needs and be able to access them.
- Web page should be interactive. There should be a page set up for volunteers, application on line and notify the section management when an application that is for their area is submitted. The volunteer bureau has this, and it is extremely beneficial.

Comments

- We have a volunteer fair with a sign-up sheet, but there is little done to follow up on these potentials. This is bad public relations and image. If someone signs up and no one gets around to speaking with them, what does that say about us?
- On the flip side, sometimes these contacts don't produce anything.

VOLUNTEER FOCUS GROUP MEETING REPORT

The following questions were asked of the City of Alexandria Parks and Recreation volunteers. A summary of their responses follows.

1) How long have you been a volunteer with the Department?

- 30 years
- 13 years
- 9 years
- 6 years
- 3 months (just starting Adopt a Park)
- 25 years
- 3 months
- 7 months
- 7 years
- 6 years
- 2 years
- 10 years
- 8 years

2) What attracted you to becoming a volunteer? How did you get involved?

- This was my first home and there were a lot of burglaries in the area. The park behind the house had a lot of kids hanging out there. With an adult present and keeping the park cleaned, it discouraged the teens that were congregating there. Then I found out there was a city fund for adopting a park, and then the state brought in their share. This evolved my level of involvement.
- Something needs to be done in our neighborhood. We are just getting started.
- I was walking with my son and watched a group of youngsters playing football. The coach came over and basically recruited me to coach and get my son involved in football.
- We were asking the city to put in a dog park, which was the first of its kind. I did the research, helped the city to figure out how to develop and support it. It was a community effort. If there is not a group of citizens who want to take the lead, nothing will happen. We have four dog parks that are fenced. There are people coming all over the region to use these four parks and it takes a lot of work to maintain.
- Beautification program along the cemeteries, owner wouldn't take care, help to keep the area nice, got involved helping the children back and forth across the streets, got involved because her children were involved
- I got started because of my grandchildren. They were involved in the sports, as well as a lot of children in the community. I saw that the children need help to grow as adults. I started to volunteer services, give them guidance and help in what I thought they needed.
- For me it started with Earth Day and editing a brochure, how to make sure we have the active and passive spaces. This got me interested in a whole set of things from wanting to help protect the spaces for the future, to removing invasive plants, litter pickup,

keeping the parks in good repairs, improving the quality of the landscaping, helping kids learn about wildlife - kids need to know about the trees and wildlife.

- Always used the recreation center. My kids went there. I encouraged the kids to go there and use. My daughter ended up working there. I was asked to be on the parent board and thought that would broaden my horizon. I enjoy it. I have lots of ideas and like serving a lot of kids.
- I was passing out job application at schools and liked working with kids. Heard about the programs and got involved.
- I have been a volunteer coach working with children for 30 years. I feel that education and sports go hand-in-hand, especially for kids with learning disabilities such as ADHT. It is an incentive to be good in school; they can't play if their grades aren't good. I also have volunteered with foster kids for 21 years.
- Got involved with mom as volunteer coach. She makes sure we are involved in good things. I want to share my God-given talents with the community and those less fortunate than I am.
- I used to play sports when younger and I saw an ad looking for volunteers.
- I liked coaching kids and then they ask if I wanted to volunteer.

3) Was there a formal application process that you went through?

- Youth coaches must complete an application.
- There are several applications within the Adopt a Park program. One must state how one is using with the money, fill out a survey, and fill out paperwork for the gardens and waiver.
- Adopt a Park has a formal contract each year. This in turn began a new application process.
- There is no application process for the Advisory Council.
- Coaches have an application and have to become certified by NYSCA. The youth sports certification serves as an insurance policy for liability.
- Youth coaches have to submit to background checks.
- Additionally, one must submit a plant specific plan, waiver of liability, and attorneys have said these are worthless.

4) Did you go through an orientation or training?

- There are some rules and regulations for Advisory Boards. We did review the rules to know what is required.
- Coaches have NYSCA certification.
- It is an unwritten rule; experienced coaches mentor new coaches.

5) Do you feel volunteers need to go through training or an orientation?

- Yes, absolutely
- If the volunteer is picking up garbage, they don't need training.
- To identify invasive plants, the volunteers teach each other.

- Advisory Boards are becoming more proactive – trying to improve their community centers, we bring in new programs and ideas to better serve the community. Some centers are very small, over crowding children.
- Parks have limited resources, trees, and plantings. These aren't managed or. Volunteers help with maintenance and look at the parks to help with supplying resources. The city has one arborist and few people to really assist the volunteers.

6) Do you record or track the number of hours you are volunteering? Are you requested by the staff to track your hours?

- Advisory Board meeting minutes are kept and recommendations for the center supervisor are recorded. This would include hours.
- From an athletic perspective, there is no formal tracking. I have an idea of the hours necessary, prescribed number of hours to coach, keep up with coaches, etc.
- Tracking of hours isn't important, don't need to keep track.
- Get involved because of a passion. Tracking would do more harm more than good.
- Volunteering is informal, why structure it?
- Sign in and out to track on a notebook.
- Require different styles of tracking for different areas.
- Adopt a Park is based on performance. Estimates of hours are tracked.
- Programs in centers would be non-existent without volunteers.
- Coaches do field preparation as well as coaching. This goes beyond the actual duties.

7) How does the department communicate news and information to you as volunteers?

- There is very little communication from the department. It would help me greatly to know what is going on in the parks, so I can inform neighbors when they ask me. As an example, when fencing is dropped off, I get calls from the neighbors wondering what is going on. It would be nice if the department would call and let me know what is going on. They have my phone number to call.
- This needs to be improved greatly. Communication is needed regarding park events, and the coordination of installation of trees, water fountains, etc. is essential. Operations could run more effectively with better communication.
- Sports community has a database that keep them informed, such as letters to former coaches
- The Department should send a notification of needs out to all of the community as well as the volunteers.
- Volunteer positions are in the Gazette and Journal, Comcast channel lists positions
- Alexandria parks brochure has bits of information. They need to look into changing the cover of the brochure. It is boring, looks like hype. This should be made to look more interesting; eye catching that has sports, kids on it, something more. Its purpose is to be about programs. The volunteer tidbits are lost in it.
- Volunteer or community brochure could be developed. Currently, the solicitation of volunteers is an afterthought.
- Alexandria volunteer bureau has a publication and that is boring too and not widely distributed.
- A list is needed to be of long and short-term volunteer opportunities.

- Notices should be sent to civic associations. They are always looking for articles.

8) How do you feel about being recognized as volunteers?

- It is important to be recognized. Volunteering is something one does from the heart.
- Thank you notes are received from the staff and that is appreciated.
- Most of the reward of volunteering comes from the joy of the kids. When they are successful or able to achieve a first, seeing their faces is really rewarding. When they are able to score a first time, run a race and win, first goal, I think those are the praises you get as a volunteer, appreciation of the children.
- We do get our rewards in bits and pieces, from kids and giving back to the community.
- Coaches don't get the credit they deserve, they receive thank you notes, but then "are you coming back next year?" They need something more. Many coaches spend their own money on the kids.
- I was involved in a citywide recognition, which was formal and held at the Hilton. This was a grass roots effort from advisory councils.
- There should be some sort of formal thank you from the city and a token of appreciation such as a shirt, a progressive recognition reward, by the amount of years, nothing extravagant, but something.

9) Any other comments or concerns with volunteer operations?

- One issue with fundraising -the Advisory Councils or volunteer groups should have the ability to purchase from and support the operations and not have to go through city procurement. This gets too expensive and bogged down by bureaucracy. This needs improvement.
- It is good to know what other groups are out there and what they are doing. We get too involved in our own area to know what is going on with other volunteer groups. I wish I had known this sooner; I might have gotten involved with that area.
- Get the information out there. This could be very helpful in finding other the common interests.
- Advisory councils should communicate with each other. The more established councils could mentor the newer ones, share ideas and strategies.
- Would like to see upgrades in the community center, landscaping, too small to serve all that need to have these opportunities, Hispanic community is growing, need to service them.
- Alexandria should fund volunteer coordinator positions because we could then leverage a whole lot more citizen involvement.
- More literature and more Spanish speaking staff in the center. We need translators, get flyers that are produced in Spanish.